

Section of the History of Medicine

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The Doctor, the Quack, and the Appetite of the Public for Magic in Medicine

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IT is a curious and at the same time highly disappointing fact, that a decrease in appreciation of the medical profession must be recorded in a time of unprecedented efflorescence of medical science. The progress of medicine in the last century is greater than that in all the preceding centuries put together. Since intuition, dogma and contemplation have made place for investigation and experiment, results have been obtained which our predecessors could not foresee in their wildest dreams. Dogmatic deduction has had to make way for the inductive method, under the guidance of which medical art has, in the latter half of the last century, developed into an experimental science.

The scientific results obtained have been widely applied to the benefit of suffering humanity. I will only mention, in passing, the statistics of disease and death-rates and will restrict myself to the one thing for which we can never be too grateful—the decrease of bodily suffering. This decrease is not, in the first place, due to the invention of a great number of anodynes, but much more to improved diagnosis and more efficient treatment, and chiefly to modern surgery, which by painless operation insures health and energy to numbers of people who formerly had to drag a sickly body to the grave. We may well ask with astonishment, what can be the reason that, with the growth of medical science there has not been a parallel rise of public appreciation of our profession; why, to-day, the multitude crowds round the loquacious quack, and why even educated people listen to the plausible words of the hypnotist. It is remarkable that intelligent people will expect healing of their ailments from the quack, of whom they know only that he knows nothing whatever of the structure and functions of the human body, while the same people would not think of entrusting a broken clock to any but a skilled and trained watchmaker.

This must surely be a sign that, deep in the soul of the people, lies the belief that medical art is a divine gift which may be exercised without science or study. Such conviction is not at all incomprehensible. We little Asklepiads are not Æsculapius himself. An effectual preventive of death is not yet ours. Nature, the great healer, makes no distinction betwixt quacks and experts, but the quack never omits to claim the credit when his merciful ally effects a cure. Moreover, the higher medical science has risen, the more it has, in its pride, estranged the public from the doctor. When medical art moves from the sick-bed to the laboratory, when we treat diseases rather than diseased people, there slips from our grasp a powerful instrument,

the personal influence of one man on another, which the quack knows how to handle in a masterly way.

Whoever sees in the problem of quackery nothing but deception on the one hand and stupidity on the other, fails to grasp the essence of the matter. He fails to appreciate both the personal element and the influence of the soul on the body in the processes of disease and healing. When, after weeks in a dim sick-room, a patient is removed to the country, an immediate, marked improvement, the visible turn for the better, is not only to be ascribed to the action of the different air on the lungs and the blood, but in even greater part on the mind. Some physicians are to their patients, by their whole personality, like a healing sun. Such are physicians by the grace of God. Even their presence at a sick-bed promises recovery, and indeed brings it in many cases, not by their learning alone, but also by the confidence in recovery which they manage to inspire in their patients. Tooth-ache vanishes on the door-step of the dentist. Coué, whom no one considered an impostor, effected his cures, not by his theory but by his personality, by his humanity, by the joyous hope which he implanted in his patients. The optimism of the doctor is transmuted in the heart of the patient into a steadfast faith, which in many a sick-room is a powerful factor for good. Thus the quack has really a much firmer position than the honest doctor. He can play the optimist under all circumstances. He can prophesy a cure of even the most grievous diseases. Doubt never assails him. He can promise anything. His conscience does not burden him. If in the promised time the cure be not established, then it is an exceptionally stubborn case, and a second and a third treatment is clearly needed. When in the end the failure can no longer be glozed over, then the fault lies with the bungling of his predecessors—the doctors—and the cheated sufferer is reproached with having waited too long to come for treatment.

Meanwhile many a quack can register real cures; not by his remedies but by his personality, his manner, his advertising. That cramps, paralyses, functional disturbances of practically all the organs may vanish under strong suggestion has long been known. Even real organic maladies sometimes present, under appropriate stimulation, a turn for good that is not to be underrated. Such cures occur in the practice of every doctor, but make by no means the impression on the public that they do when coming from a quack. The doctor who cures or shall we say assists Nature in the cure, has but done his duty. Curing is his profession. *Not* being able to cure would be a sign of his incompetence! How different is public appreciation of the quack. Failures, mistakes, absurdities are not laid to his account. After all he is only a quack! But a recovery during his treatment, even though in reality he has had no part nor lot therein, will go from tongue to tongue and become more and more significant and marvellous at each recounting.

Mankind believes in the wonder of healing as a divine gift. Only so can it be explained that a loutish country-bumpkin for years managed to attract a stream of people, who were or who imagined themselves sick, to Staphorst, a small village in the east of my country. Among them were men and women of culture and rank, who never thought of this yokel as dowered with medical knowledge, but whose hope was fixed on the miracle of his innate or magically acquired gift of healing. For years they came in crowds though the cures can have been mere oases in a vast desert of failures. Those who returned unrelieved felt no urge to boast of their adventure. It was far other with the cured. A Baroness from The Hague was at last rid of the nervous spasms she had had for years! A minister lost his characteristic little cough and was suddenly able to hold forth without his sugar-and-water! Such as these gave to many a sufferer an inducement to visit the miracle-worker.

The history of quackery yields splendid samples of mass-suggestion by the craziest "cure-twaddlers." Some forty years ago I was a witness in Amsterdam of

the fact that Sequah, an American rheumatism-healer, by sounding a trumpet, collected thousands round him and then broke the crutches of cripples, and, to the boundless astonishment of the crowd, made these hobblers walk away unsupported for the first time in years. Sequah drove about in a four-in-hand attended by liveried servants and he visited the royal residence which seemed to have become infatuated with him. But things went badly with all the poor creatures cured in public. The Dutch Society for the Suppression of Quackery on inquiry found that the trial they had been through had cost them dear.

In many ways more remarkable, and more instructive from the point of view of mob-psychology, is the recent Zeileis story, of which much was made some years ago. In the castle at Gallsbach, an Alpine village in Austrian Bohemia, lived for several years a wizard with a long beard, the quondam locksmith, Valentin Zeileis. From far and wide the sick and crippled flocked to this magic castle, where all the ailments that plague humanity were banished by a dazzling electric spectacle. The whole village was adjusted to his activities. All its houses were crammed with the sick. At all hours in his waiting-room, or "*Präparatorium*," was a crowd in an agony of excitement. The examination of a new patient was a very simple affair. The wizard just made some passes over him with his magic wand and at once recognized the nature of the disease from the power of the flashes that came from that marvellous staff! The conjurer then directed the treatment to begin. A horde of a hundred to a hundred and fifty patients, stripped to the waist, poured into the treatment hall—the "*Mysterium*." At the entrance grinned a human skeleton; the hall was illumined by little red lamps; the walls were decked with stuffed snakes; the air was laden with choking-point with ozone. At the head of the sad procession went the blind, hand-in-hand, led by a "sister"; the rest followed. The end of the procession consisted of the crippled and the lame on crutches and stretchers. This mob was literally driven past the electric apparatus, and for a minute or two was treated with Roentgen rays, with high-frequency rays "intensified by radium" and with "helium lamps" and other things. Untranslated I will read you what one of Zeileis' own disciples related of this "*Mysterium*": "*Es zischt und sprüht, braust Funkengarben aus dem Geisterbesen, wirft weisse Lichtsignale über die nackten und halbnackten Körper, knattert, leuchtet, glüht grün, lila, rosa, ein spukhaftes Inferno.*"

An Inferno indeed, entirely fitted up with a view to the money-box of the long-bearded Lucifer, who drew from this hell an income of five or six thousand marks a day (more than £100,000 a year). Between a thousand and two thousand patients per day were treated in this manner. Whoso considers this will agree with the great Erasmus of Rotterdam, when the latter makes his *Moria* maintain that human life is but a game of folly. It is indeed no wonder that, in Germany, where quackery was not held in check by the law, "*Zeileis-Institutes*" sprang up like mushrooms. For here, too, on account of the mystical tendency of the post-war mentality, the ground was favourable for the reception of such electrical hocus-pocus. Three years ago it fortunately occurred to Zeileis to bring a law-suit for slander and dishonest competition against the famous professor Lazarus, who in word and writing had pilloried the "*Gallsbacher Heilslehren*." This gave the universally respected professor, who was impelled by his love of truth, the opportunity to shed some much-needed daylight on all the Zeileis nonsense. The sources of the electric rays were the same as had long been used by all radiologists, but with professional skill. The novel element was supposed to be in their combination, namely, the "hundred-fold reinforcement" of the high-frequency by the addition of radium. Physically, however, such a combination is an absurdity. The same applies to the helium lamp. The minute doses of ultra-violet and Roentgen rays administered by Zeileis could not possibly do anything, neither could the moment's radiation with arc-light. At the request of Lazarus, a number of healthy people allowed themselves to be examined

by Zeileis with the wand. On that occasion they suddenly developed heart trouble, bilious inflammation, gastric ulcers, pulmonary consumption. Lazarus himself, as sound as a bell, was given to understand at two "Original Zeileis Institutes," at München, on the same day, at one, that he was suffering from pulmonary catarrh and from inflammation of the bile duct; at the other, that he had spinal disease. But however the diagnosis ran, the treatment was always the same. In the lawsuit, "Zeileis versus Lazarus," by way of providing comic relief, two cases were mentioned of ventral swelling in women, swellings which, in spite of diligent radiation, grew larger and larger, until at last they emerged and had to be notified at the office of the registrar of births! Lazarus tells of his meeting with a paralysed woman in Gallsbach, who had attended there regularly for eight years, and in that period had undergone a thousand radiation treatments! But now, she thought, she would soon be cured! Should one wish to dismiss the examples of Gallsbach as not applying to us Westerners; should we think that in these regions people are not so easily taken in by such grotesque humbug, then I need only remind you with regard to my own country, of the Sequah fever, which raged for a short time it is true, but most violently, and which, in the manner of an epidemic of influenza, within a few weeks had attacked the whole country.

Our generation is perhaps more learned, but not more sensible than those of yore. Superstition is not openly confessed, but it is deeply ingrained. The oracle of Delphi was reincarnated in Staphorst. Hundreds still seek healing from the old lady in Whitechapel who performs miracles with an egg. Women of standing and culture who suffer from rheumatism believe in the healing properties of an East-Indian amulet-bracelet. One may then well ask: "Is not the struggle against quackery a hopeless task? Do not even the gods fight stupidity in vain?" Little help may be expected from the instruction as to the structure, functions and disturbances of the human frame. Pope's epigram about the danger of "a little learning" is ever applicable. Students at their first clinical lecture feel, in their own bodies, the most horrible diseases. Even more quickly in the unenlightened does a little knowledge of anatomy and pathology produce shadows of the imagination which make men and women an easy prey to quackery.

Yet it will not do to get out of the problem of quackery with a casual "populus vult decipi." The appetite of the public for magic in medicine has not only a comical and a philosophical side but also a very dark social aspect. The damage it does to individuals and to the community is immense; it cannot be expressed in figures. What cheated hope, what bitter disillusionment, how much anxiety artificially roused and sustained! Lazarus relates of unfortunate beings deliberately kept in fear of cancer for years, who, under the care of a sensible physician, would never have lost their balance. Which of us older practitioners has not many a time had the satisfaction of putting the unsteady on the right track? The medical man, with all his faults and imperfections, is distinguished from the quack by his honest desire for the good of his patients, which is a thing that leaves the quack cold. I need only remind you of the mysterious books on sexual matters, meant to get money out of the pockets of schoolboys, and by which in many a child's heart the most terrible anxiety, nay, even despair, has been awakened. The casual lightness with which the despair of the sick is exploited is truly criminal. Zeileis could cure diabetes without prescribing a diet; cancer without an operation. By such promises thousands were robbed of a fair chance of recovery. By inquiry from hospitals and from physicians Lazarus collected hundreds of case-reports which he laid before the court. Here is a random selection: goitre behind the breast-bone, which might certainly have been cured by operating; the patient died of suffocation on the way home. Pleural effusion which might have been saved by timely tapping. Patients with "Zeileised" gastric ulcers, which afterwards perforated, admitted to the hospital, in a pitiful condition.

I have resurrected enough of such stories. But yet such stories as that of Zeileis are the best means of opening the eyes of the authorities and the public to the dangers of quackery. I do not know how matters stand in this country, but in mine the judges show unlimited long-suffering towards quacks. Evidently they believe more than they themselves realize, in a gift of healing unknown to science, but bestowed on simple souls. The Gallsbacher "*Mysterium*" sheds a peculiar light on the unsuspecting nature of this belief. We matter-of-fact people, who watched that scene from a distance, wondered how it was possible that, of the hordes driven through that electric hell, so few, on returning to clear daylight, became shamefully aware of their folly. The musical-comedy background, the absurdity of the magic wand, the absence of any medical examination, the uniform treatment of every thinkable ailment, this we thought was too much to be unresistingly digested by sane minds. It has often struck me that our judges attach great value to the statements of witnesses who declared that they had been benefited by a quack. What do they think of the many statements which Zeileis would be only too glad to show them about spinal consumption, cancer, tuberculosis, nephritis, heart diseases, cured in his Inferno?

Neither is the amount of money the public pays for its gullibility to be accurately estimated. Yet the publicity—the thousands of bills, pamphlets, advertisements—give some idea of the sums sacrificed year after year on the altar of deception. If only for this last most tangible reason, an energetic fight against quackery is imperative.

And now for a word as to the relation of doctor and quack to the public. In the great company of medical men and women there are good and bad elements, and there are quacks there too. I am willing also to assume that not all quacks are wholly to be condemned. Undoubtedly there are among them those who honestly believe that, by the favour of God, they possess the true remedy. This belief is similar to the exaggerated confidence in the power of a certain mode of treatment which is sometimes found in medical practitioners. Such people may be driven by their love of their neighbour or by public spirit. But in the great army of quacks the virtuous ones are a small minority. I have for years occupied myself with a particular group of quacks—those who exploit the deaf. They are numerous, and none is tormented by an interest in the fate of their patients. It is most aggravating that, year after year, these unfortunate people pay a high tax into the pockets of a gang of cheats. It is especially aggravating that the poor contribute what they cannot afford, and with no more chance of the realization of their hopes than has the drowning man who clutches at a straw.

I have an idea that in the medical corps the truly bad are very exceptional. Bernard Shaw, in his "*Preface on Doctors*," maintains in his usual hyperbolic manner, that "it is simply unscientific to allege or believe that doctors do not perform unnecessary operations and manufacture and prolong lucrative illnesses." Undoubtedly there are doctors whose principal thought is not the patient, but the patient's purse. But the same spirit is found among those who follow other vocations, and it is unfair to judge the whole profession by this standard. I cannot believe that there are many among us who would unnecessarily put their knives into a fellow creature. I do not deny that the choice of the medical career is often determined by its social prospects. Yet among those who have entered upon medical practice there will be comparatively few who do not feel the heavy personal responsibility for the lives entrusted to their care.

A similar relation exists between doctors and quacks, with regard to medical insight. I am far from denying diagnostic intuition, an inborn fitness for medical work. Nurses not infrequently have the clinical eye and I do not mind confessing that on the first suggestion of scarlatina, erysipelas and pneumonia, things which do not belong to an otological clinic, I involuntarily glance up to read the confirmation

of my suspicion on the face of my head nurse. This innate bump of diagnosis partly explains the success of some quacks, who, however, on account of their ignorance of the human body, and also for the ethical reasons just mentioned, are most dangerous persons. Although I consider the suppression of quackery an urgent necessity, I do not for a moment entertain the possibility of eradicating the Erasmian folly. I am fully aware of its immortality. The struggle is not against that, but against those who exploit the foibles of the soul of the people for their own profit. It is the struggle against deception in its most contemptible form, the deception which speculates on the afflictions of mankind.